Outside the walls of medieval Cairo, in the district of the Darb al-Gamamiz, today a modest working-class neighborhood, there stands a solitary survivor from the Mamluk period. This is a plain congregational mosque far from the other medieval monuments clustered in the heart of the historic city and along its ceremonial arteries. The inscription informs us that the mosque was built in 740 (1339-40) by Sitt Hadaq, a slave woman and the dāda (nursemaid) of Sultan Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun (fig. 1). This in itself is noteworthy: it means that the mosque, among all of Cairo’s remaining monuments, is the one only constructed by a court lady. It also means that among all the monuments surviving from the period of Sultan Nasir Muhammad, whose third reign from 1310–41 was the most brilliant period of medieval Cairo, especially in architecture, this is the only one built by a woman. Furthermore, a study of the Qur'anic inscription on the façade and of the remains of the decoration
on the mihrab, supplemented by information supplied by al-Maqrizi, the topographer of medieval Cairo, leads us to comparisons with other major monuments of the period and to some insight into court patronage.

Like many of the monuments of historic Cairo, this mosque is today under siege from the many pressures of contemporary urban society. In 1990 and again in 1993 the mosque was closed and undergoing extensive excavations due to damage from the rising subsurface water table. The decoration of the mihrab — all that is left of the mosque’s ornamentation and an important statement about fourteenth-century architectural practices — is about to vanish. It seems worthwhile therefore to record what we can about the mosque before the evidence disappears completely.

Location. On a contemporary map, the mosque lies in an area bounded on the north by Abdin Palace, on the east by Sharia Port Said, on the south by Sayyida Zaynab and on the west by Midan Lazogli. Slanting across this rough quadrangle, more or less from southwest to northeast, is a street which starts as Sharia al-Nasiriya and becomes Suwayqat al-Sabbā’in. These names are all that remain of the area’s fourteenth-century topography: the canal of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad, and the Seven Windmills. The canal was dug in 1325 to drain the swamps left by a receding Nile for new urban expansion to the west of, and more or less parallel with, the Khalij al-Masri or the Great Canal which since pharaonic times had connected the Nile with the Red Sea, and the windmills were once distinguishing features of the orchard section to the southwest of the city of al-Qahira. This area was also known as al-Maris, because most of its inhabitants came from the Sudan. The mosque of Sitt Hadaq stands at the intersection of two small streets, one leading from Suwayqat al-Sabbā’in, and the other one at right angles from Sharia Port Said, the street which in the late nineteenth century replaced the filled-in Khalij. On the eastern side of the Khalij, near what was the Bridge of Lions, Amir Bashkat built a mosque in 1337. Its portal and minaret are all that remain of the only other contemporary building in this area.

Description. Just over the door of Sitt Hadaq’s mosque is a historic inscription, which reads: “The foundation of this mosque (jami‘) was ordered by the Needy of God, the Pilgrim to the House of God [i.e., Mecca] and visitor to the tomb of the Messenger of God (i.e., Medina) — on him blessings and greetings — the Elevated Curtain Hadaq, known by the name of Sitt Miska al-Nasiriyya [slave of the sultan] in the months of the year 740 [i.e., between July 9, 1389, and June 27, 1340].”

The name of the patron and the date of construction are thus known. Maqrizi tells us that Hadaq, known also as Miska or Lady Musk, was a slave in the household of the sultan, where from nursemaid (dāda) she rose to stewardess (qahramana) in charge of the affairs of the harem and of the training and education of the children of the royal house. The sultan entrusted to her all the matters of his wives, and she ruled over his household so that no one ever spoke to her as anything but as the Lady Hadaq. The sultan was guided by her opinion “in planning royal weddings and in grand entertainments given on feasts and festivals.” Maqrizi further notes that Hadaq acquired an enormous fortune and great fame, and lived a long life marked by devotion, charity, and good works. Although most sources refer to her as the “nurse of al-Malik al-Nasir,” in fact her position was that of controller of Nasir Muhammad’s harem. Lady Hadaq, or Lady Musk, was then a slave, most likely Sudanese, who rose to a position of power, influence, and wealth at the sultan’s court. This information is corroborated by other clues.

The mosque’s exterior decoration is simple and, since it is typical of contemporary Mamluk faqas, it is unremarkable. Decoration is confined to the southwest and northwest faces, which are of dissimilar lengths but are united by the horizontal and vertical elements they share. A band of inscription in handsome monumental Mamluk thuluth script runs the length of both faces. It begins in the far eastern corner and ends at the western corner. Its placing is high on the façade, at a level four-fifths the building’s height. Vertically, the two faces contain seven bays, six on the southwest façade and one on the northwest. Each bay contains two basic elements: above the inscription, a panel of stalactites in four rows; and below the inscription at mid point on the façade, a composite window unit of a round light over two arched panels. There is a slight difference in the shape and arrangement of the stalactite niches of the panels which provides rhythm and variety: beginning in the southeast corner, the square panels in bays number 1, 3, 5, 7 have four rows of pointed keel-arched stalactites; in the panels of nos. 2 and 6 the niches are round and are arranged in a suggestive stair step outline; no. 4, is deeper than the other six units, and the stalactites form a canopy over the main entrance.

Inside the mosque the courtyard is framed on all sides by three arches which rest on piers. A torus molding outlines the arches. Above the molding and between the